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Blazing the Way to Final Victory

Washington's Order of
29 August 1781

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FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
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16 December 1920

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Proceedings of the Fifth Anniversary of the New Brunswick
Historical Club, December 16, 1875 (Unnumbered)

I.

Adoption of the Constitution of the United States by New Jersey
Commemorative Exercises, 16 December 1887
With an Appendix

II.

Rutgers (Queen's) College and Medical Degrees
A Paper Read Before the Club by David D. Demarest, D.D, LL.D.
December 21, 1893 and January 18, 1894

III.

The Charter of the City of New Brunswick of Dec. 30, 1730 and
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February 1913

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Blazing the Way to Final Victory, Washington's Order of
29 August 1781

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Blazing the Way to Final Victory

**Washington's Order of
29 August 1781**

[Scott, Austin]
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Blazing the Way to Final Victory

1781

When the news of the allied triumph at Yorktown arrived in France, early in November, 1781, Franklin wrote to Washington: "All the world agree that no expedition was ever better planned, or better executed. It brightens the glory that must accompany your name to the latest posterity." And Vergennes, chief in the French administration, asserted: "History offers few examples of a success so complete." Has the transport of that moment resolved itself into the settled judgment of our generation? Was the happy result at Yorktown an exploit for the ages?

English historians, as a rule, are slow to concede to Washington first rank as a soldier, however ready they may be to acclaim the greatness of his character. Goldwin Smith, declaring that Washington was indispensable to the cause, denies that he is one of the greatest captains, for he "never won a battle." F. W. Fortescue in his "History of the British Army," says of Washington: "His fame as a military commander rests on the surprise at Trenton and on his march from the Hudson to the Chesapeake in 1781. Yet though every Englishman must admire him as a very great man and a brave and skilful soldier, it is, I think, doubtful whether he has any claim to be regarded as a really great commander in the field. He was not, it is true, a soldier by profession, but neither was Cromwell and I take it that few would venture to rate Washington as a general so highly as Cromwell."

Knight in his "Popular History of England," gives a more favorable judgment, saying of the Yorktown campaign: "Those qualities of a commander, which are, at the least, as important, if not so dazzling, as the ability to 'set a squadron in the field' have been rarely displayed more signally than in the prudent care of Washington that no disorder should ensue from the sudden change in his whole plan of operations. He had to provide against the chance of attack on his march from New York to Trenton and he adroitly managed to lead Clinton to believe that the march was a feint—"

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Perhaps the finest summary of the qualities of Washington, constituting him a standard among men, is that of Thackeray, who in his "Virginians" allows one of his characters to declare, when comparing Washington with Wolfe: "Here indeed is a greater than Wolfe. To endure is greater than to dare; to tire out hostile fortune; to be daunted by no difficulty; to keep heart when all have lost it; to go through intrigue spotless; to forego ambition when the end is gained; who shall say this is not greatness, or show the Englishman who has achieved so much?"

The judgment of American historians as to Washington's rank as a soldier has been largely determined, perhaps biased, by a contemplation of his character in its aggregate of qualities, military, political and other, and their mutual adjustment, rather than merely the soldierly qualities, and further, by a view of the vast results flowing from the Yorktown capitulation. John Fiske in his "American Revolution," says: "Had anyone predicted eight months before, that Washington on the Hudson and Cornwallis on the Catawba eight hundred miles apart, would so soon come together and terminate the war on the coast of Virginia he would have been thought a wild prophet indeed. For thoroughness of elaboration and promptness of execution, the movement on Washington's part was as remarkable as the march of Napoleon, in the autumn of 1805, when he swooped from the shore of the English Channel into Bavaria and captured the Austrian Army at Ulm."

It seems to be true that the most painstaking and expert analyses of Washington's character and ability fail to dissociate his capacity for military command from the qualities of the statesman and the man. It is a subordinate though integrant part of the whole.

The events of the five months from May to November 1781 reveal Washington's military qualities in their full exercise, but also and only as a part of those which render him one among the foremost.

Washington had a forefeeling that the year 1781 was to be decisive of the fate of America. The early months brought a clear challenge to the master-spirit. On the one hand, difficulties were at their height, but obstacles must be made conditions of success. The strain of six long years was telling on the tried souls of patriots.

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The Articles of Confederation, finally and just now adopted, were already proving their inadequacy. The Congress, though it had made some reforms in method and had shifted financial management and responsibility to Robert Morris, was dilatory, if not incompetent for real government. Money and men and supplies were woefully lacking. The foe was strongly intrenched in two of the great gateways of the continent, in New York and Charleston, and Cornwallis was active in his purpose to subdue Virginia and to control the Chesapeake.

On the other hand, there was inspiring promise. Greene had done his great work in the south. Lafayette, that fine blend of zeal and prudence, was showing his mettle in Virginia. The alliance with France was, at the end of three years, ready to prove its worth on land and sea. Thus, disadvantages and advantages united in a challenge to the American Commander in Chief. Could he devise and execute a plan which would subdue the former, "turning necessity to glorious gain," and command the latter and so compel fortune to do his bidding?

The situation demanded two military qualities of high, perhaps highest, order; first, to conceive a plan, large, comprehensive, perfect in details, accurate in its calculations; and secondly, so fashioned as to be instantly re-adjustable at the quick touch of chance. As never before in his experience the protagonist of the cause had to deal with elements of time and large distances, of land and sea, of home and allied France, and his thrust must strike the vulnerable spot as chance and the enemy should expose it. And Washington met the challenge.

The French forces were at Newport, Rhode Island, the American at New Windsor on the Hudson. Washington summoned Rochambeau to Wethersfield just below Hartford, where in a conference on the 21st of May, the plan was devised, definite in scope and purpose and detail, yet including the indefiniteness of a possible necessity for rapid re-adjustment. Pursuant to the preliminary part of the plan, the French and American troops were joined in June in the vicinity of New York. Reconnoitering, manoeuvres, skirmishes, and the offer of battle to Sir Henry Clinton, consumed the summer until the middle of August. The British Commander had intrenched

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himself more firmly in New York Island and had received reinforcements of men and ships. The French foresaw difficulties, dangers, perhaps the impossibility of the success of an attempt by their fleet, should it come, to force a passage into New York harbor and control it. Then came the lightning change.

On the 14th of August advices arrived from DeGrasse, then in command of the French fleet in the West Indies, that he was about to bring to the continent 28 sail and a land force of 3,000 men, and that he would make for the Chesapeake. The plan was adjusted accordingly on the 17th of August and a week later the two armies were across the Hudson, ferried from King's Bridge to Stony Point. They were to march in four columns—two French and two American—the French by the more northerly route, to Whippany, near Morristown, thence through the upper part of Somerset County to Trenton, and thence on to the south. These two columns marched one day apart, the rear column occupying at night the camp left for them each morning by the advance column. The two American columns were to separate at Chatham, name of happy omen, the one marching to Bound Brook, thence to Princeton and Trenton and on. The left column, preceded by Washington and led by Benjamin Lincoln, general of well-deserved fame, was to take the route through New Brunswick to Princeton and Trenton and on.

The foregoing considerations containing familiar history have been presented by the writer of this paper as a setting for an order of Washington issued in New Brunswick on the 29th of August to Simeon De Witt. This son of Rutgers, graduated in 1776, was in 1781 the geographer of the American Army, having been appointed by Congress the previous December to fill the position left vacant by the death of Robert Erskine. The original of this order of Washington has recently been acquired by Rutgers. It is a holograph and not, as is the case of many of his orders and letters in those crowded days of the great adventure, dictated to one of his aids. It is here presented in a photographic copy and reads as follows:

“Brunswick, Aug. 29, 1781.

“Sir:—Immediately upon receipt of this you will begin to Survey the road (if it has not been done already) to Princeton—thence

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through Maidenhead to Trenton—thence to Philadelphia—thence to the head of Elk through Darby, Chester, Wilmington, Christiana bridge.

“At the head of Elk you will receive further orders. I need not observe to you the necessity of noting Towns, villages and remarkable Houses and places but I must desire that you will give me the rough traces of your Survey as you proceed on as I have reasons for desiring this as soon as possible.

“I am Sir

“Yr very Hble Servt.

“Go. Washington.”

We of this community and of this college need not from motives of local interest and pride assume that upon this order and its execution hung the fortunes of the great enterprise. It was a cog in the plan and played its part no doubt with some degree of importance in the series of events. But aside from its relative value in this respect, it has notable significance.

Washington arrived in New Brunswick from Chatham on the 28th of August 1781. Four years and nine months before, in November, 1776, he had crossed from the north to the south bank of the Raritan, then as now at the head of his army. Time and events in this interval had wrought their shaping processes. Such are not lost on men already great. For them too, four years in the university of experience have value. In 1776 Washington had planned to end the retreat at New Brunswick, here to make a stand, here to fight a decisive battle. But here the Continental army was melting like wax before the fire. Jersey and Maryland troops left for home—their time was up. And the British in the pursuit were but an hour's march away. Washington wanted an army, so he wrote, “to look the enemy in the face.” “Cruelly disappointed” as his immediate purpose dissolved into a vanishing shadow, his spirit saddened but uncrushed, thrusting his way through the November mists, with unflinching resolution, he led the remnant of his army, numbering less than 3,000 effectives, from this spot to the Delaware. What a contrast in these two appearances of Washington in New Brunswick! Now on the 29th of August 1781, a body of 5,000 troops of France are, at his bidding, in ordered and gay array

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making their march to the goal. The right column of the American army are arriving in Bound Brook for their night's camping, as Washington, preceding his column by a day, is entering New Brunswick. Our army too had been trained and hardened by the service and discipline of years and was composed in sufficient part of veterans. Now the heavy footfall of the retreat of 1776 was to become the elastic tread of confident victors.

Before Washington went to bed that night, it would seem that he felt that a definite phase of the plan ended here, and here a new one in its execution was to begin, for before retiring he makes this entry in his expense account, to be submitted to Congress when his job was done: "August 28. To expenditures on my march from ye White Plains by way of King's Ferry to Brunswick, £38. .15. .0."

Up to this point the real objective in the plan had been concealed with scrupulous care. At the first, only Washington and Rochambeau had conceived of it and devised it as a possibility. Events had strengthened this possibility. It became a certainty and definite when Washington learned of DeGrasse's intention, and on the 17th of August he threw the whole force of his will and skill into its execution. To one and another of his chosen confidants, as necessity required for the conduct of the campaign, Washington in strictest confidence revealed the combined purpose—to Lafayette in Virginia, to Governor Trumbull in Connecticut, to Governor Livingston in New Jersey, to Robert Morris in Philadelphia, to General Heath deputed to command the troops left to guard the Hudson.

It is at this juncture that the order to DeWitt was written and that it becomes of special significance in history, and of particular interest to us of New Brunswick and of Rutgers. The order, brief as it is, reveals many of the choicest characteristics of its author; his commanding dignity, his unflinching courtesy, his knowledge of this highway of the nation, his grasp of affairs and of the situation, his alertness and his assurance of the final issue. Without dwelling on this aspect of the order, it may be said that the fact of the issuance of such an order at that moment and at this place gives it large significance. Now and here the carefully concealed secret could be divulged, for this was the last place where the feint of a flank attack on New York by way of Staten Island, or of the support of a French fleet off Sandy Hook, could longer deceive the

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enemy. Now all the world may learn the plan; the cloud-screen may now be lifted and secrecy flung to the winds. Here too was the casting of the die when the Raritan was crossed. When DeWitt should set out to obey the order it would need no preternatural shrewdness to penetrate the purpose of the march. Nor did Washington enjoin secrecy on DeWitt. The order was probably written early on the morning of the 29th and as Washington was about to mount his horse, for we find him on that same day, after the ride of thirty-odd miles, writing letters and orders in Trenton. This order means, as Washington swings away from the Raritan to the southward, from the pretended to the real path, that enemy and friend alike may learn his purpose as it emerges from concealment. It was a challenge to the foe, it was a summons to his countrymen to share his resolution and his assurance that the way was now to be blazed to the goal. So the football leader in the mimic warfare of his field calls out his signal to the team for the final effort.

The English historian, Trevelyan, in his "History of George the Third and Charles James Fox," treating of this event in the American Revolution, says: "Washington knew that the surest way to keep a secret was to keep it himself. . . . No man of all the thousands who marched with Washington and Rochambeau during that last week of August 1781 knew for certain whither he was bound. Even generals of brigade and division supposed that their destination was Staten Island and remained under that impression until they had left New Brunswick behind."

So rapid was the movement, say the historians, that however much the men might have begun to wonder, they had reached Philadelphia before the purpose of the expedition was distinctly understood. At Philadelphia, Washington and his army were met by Congress and the people with an outburst of exulting hope. It was a response to the exultant hope, which, close-locked in the breast of Washington and a selected few, is when New Brunswick is passed to become the possession of patriot America and the foreboding of the foe. The order to DeWitt is a token that virtually at New Brunswick the entrance gate to victory was flung open. The sending of the order was like the pressing of the little electric button which releases power.

Four days after the order was dispatched to DeWitt, Sir Henry

Clinton in New York first learned that he had been outgeneraled; that the battle he had declined to fight when confronted by Washington and Rochambeau on the banks of the Hudson was to be fought by his subordinate and rival, Cornwallis; that the letters sent by Washington to be intercepted, to mislead the judgment of the British Commander, and the boats assembled, were but a smoke screen. He knew it now on the 2nd of September, the day when the French and American armies were passing through the streets of Philadelphia inspiring in the acclaiming throngs of citizens the glad forefeeling of the coming triumph. The order to DeWitt was a symbol that the anchor of hope, shaped in the forge and heat of six long years, was here lifted to the deck of the Ship of State as she was putting out into the open.

The plan was developing, it was here unfolded, though its execution was but in part achieved. Difficulties still lay in the way, obstacles must be encountered, the carefully contrived engine of victory must function properly through the nice adjustment of its parts and its prudent manipulation. The empty war-chest must get, through the exertions of Robert Morris, at least enough to meet the pressing needs of the unpaid soldiers who were dreading to undergo the humid heat of the Virginia summer. Hazards and chance were in lurking, so unforeseen as the impulse of DeGrasse at almost the last moment to sail away to meet his engagements in the West Indies. DeGrasse yielded to Washington's letter of entreaty, which carried the immortal words: "A great mind knows how to make a personal sacrifice to secure an important general good." Lafayette, bearing the letter to DeGrasse, supplemented it with personal persuasion, and the mind of DeGrasse in that moment and for that enterprise expanded to greatness.

The spirit of universal hope was no longer one of trembling expectation but was becoming one of resolute confidence; and if the whole transformation was not wrought in New Brunswick, it was here to begin to manifest itself as Washington issued his command to DeWitt.

It was on the 30th of August, the day after Washington left New Brunswick, that General Lincoln, designated at Yorktown to receive

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the sword of Cornwallis, arrived at "Brunswick Landing" at the head of the left column of the American forces.

Accurate maps are an essential in war's outfit, as so clearly shown in the late war of the world. How far DeWitt's "rough traces of the Survey," to be sent to Washington as he "proceeded on," contributed to the great result, we do not know; but we do know that, if he obeyed the instructions of the Commander-in-Chief, he was the herald of the new day, and he may with right take in our grateful hearts at least equal rank with Paul Revere, acclaimed in song and story for a midnight ride. No doubt he did obey his instructions, for Washington two years and a half later commends him to Jefferson then engaged in framing the Ordinance for the survey of the Western lands, as "sober, industrious and a very good mathematician;" and again, in 1796, in connection with the same kind of service Washington says: "Mr. DeWitt is a man of profound knowledge in mathematics and sufficiently skilled in astronomy." And Washington was a surveyor by profession. Doubtless DeWitt obeyed this order.

In the nice balance of chance, which a single incident might disturb, we may assume that the "rough traces" and their more finished form played their proper part in tipping the beam in one scale of which lay the fortunes of the new Republic.

It should be a source of inspiration to us, and to all succeeding generations in this community, that here the plan of the great and successful enterprise took the wings of the morning, that here the order was issued to blaze the way to final victory, that this command was given to a son of Queen's, now Rutgers, College—his commission as herald of the approaching dawn.

Washington took command of the American Army at Cambridge, unsheathing his sword close by the gates of Harvard, and with it, steadfast of eye and hand and heart, pointed the way into the *unknown*. At Brunswick, close by the gates of Rutgers—within them indeed, it may be said, in view of this order to a son of this College—Washington, the blade of his sword burnished to an unfading lustre by the vicissitudes of long years, pointed to the spot, *known* to his prophetic soul as the chosen place of victory.

Rutgers College.

AUSTIN SCOTT.

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